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The situation in Afghanistan

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The situation in Afghanistan and its implications for international peace and security

Report of the Secretary-General

I. Introduction

1. The present report is submitted pursuant to General Assembly resolution 68/11 and Security Council resolution 2210 (2015), in which I was requested to report every three months on developments in Afghanistan.

2. The report provides an update on the activities of the United Nations in Afghanistan, including significant humanitarian, development and human rights efforts, since the issuance of my previous report, of 27 February 2015 (A/69/801-S/2015/151). It also provides a summary of key political and security developments and regional and international events related to Afghanistan.

II. Relevant developments

3. The appointment of all cabinet members brought the formation of the National Unity Government to near completion. With a cabinet all but in place, efforts were reinvigorated for advancing the reform agenda of President Ashraf Ghani and Chief Executive Abdullah Abdullah. Implementation of socioeconomic policies remained a pressing concern, however, and additional appointments, including at the provincial level, were still pending. While the establishment of the Special Commission on Electoral Reform provided a mechanism for advancing towards the agreed goal of enhancing electoral integrity, the Commission has yet to start its work, and the electoral calendar has yet to be announced. Efforts by the Government continued with regard to commencing a process for peace and reconciliation, including the mobilization of backing by regional partners. Conflict-related violence increased as the Afghan National Security Forces sought to contain insurgent activity whose intensification resulted in record high levels of civilian casualties.

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A. Political developments

4. Since my previous report, the formation of the National Unity Government was completed, after the 16 ministerial nominations announced by President Ghani and Chief Executive Abdullah on 21 March were confirmed by the lower house of the National Assembly on 18 April, and President Ghani announced the nomination of a candidate for Minister of Defence on 23 May. Of the 24 ministers confirmed to date, four are women. Other important positions remain to be filled, including the Governor of the Central Bank, the Attorney-General and the Chief Justice of the Supreme Court. On 25 April, the lower house of the National Assembly approved the appropriation of a budget for the Office of the Chief Executive and a Secretariat of the Council of Ministers, which had been created by presidential decree. On 26 April, Chief Executive Abdullah appointed the Head of the Secretariat of the Council of Ministers.

5. On 7 April the President announced an initiative to establish a social contract between the Government and citizens of the country, in keeping with the reform agenda presented at the London Conference on Afghanistan. In the first meeting of the cabinet, on 23 April, President Ghani instructed ministers to formulate strategies for their first 100 days in office. On 26 May, at an extraordinary cabinet meeting, President Ghani announced the launch of those plans by the ministries. The President stated that the plans would be presented by each minister publicly in order to promote accountability and would be reviewed at the end of the period. He also stressed the importance of coordination by the ministries to improve service delivery.

6. On 27 April, the Office of the President announced the appointment of the Head of the Independent Directorate of Local Governance, as well as the governors for Kandahar and Herat Provinces. As at 27 May, governors were appointed for 12 out of 34 provinces, leaving 22 provinces led by acting governors. Consistent with the ministerial appointments process, President Ghani excluded incumbents from reappointment.

7. From 22 to 25 March, President Ghani and Chief Executive Abdullah visited Washington, D.C., where President Ghani met with the President of the United States of America, Barack Obama. In a joint statement issued on 24 March, they announced a new development partnership, in which up to $800 million in bilateral economic assistance would be earmarked for Afghan development and reform priorities; the United States would maintain its posture of 9,800 troops through the end of 2015; and the outcome of any Afghan-led peace process would include the Taliban and other armed opposition groups ending the violence, breaking ties with international terrorist groups and accepting Afghanistan's Constitution. On 26 March, I met with President Ghani and underlined the steadfast commitment of the United Nations to the development of a peaceful and stable Afghanistan.

8. In their 21 September 2014 agreement to establish a National Unity Government, President Ghani and Chief Executive Abdullah agreed to undertake electoral reforms. Limited progress has been made in that regard. On 21 March, President Ghani issued a presidential decree establishing a 15-member Special Commission on Electoral Reform. A member of the lower house of the National Assembly was selected to lead the Commission. The process for fully institutionalizing the Commission remained unclear owing to ongoing discussions

between the offices of the President and the Chief Executive about the chairmanship and confirmation of its operational modalities.

9. According to the Constitution, Parliamentary elections should have taken place between 21 April and 21 May 2015. The current mandate of the lower house of the National Assembly expires on 22 June. On 1 April, the Second Vice-President, Mohammad Sarwar Danish, announced a delay of the Parliamentary elections until 2016, citing the need to allow time for the implementation of electoral reforms. Asserting that the mandate to announce and manage the electoral calendar rested solely with the Independent Election Commission, the Chair of the Commission, Ahmad Yousuf Nuristani, argued that postponing the vote was contrary to Afghan law and noted that proposals had been sent by the Commission to the Government on possible electoral dates. In the absence of an electoral calendar and concrete steps towards electoral reform, and citing the need for greater government funding of elections, international donors announced the scaling down of funding for the Afghan electoral institutions. As a result, the Independent Election Commission and Independent Electoral Complaints Commission began the process of reducing staff and assessing ways to lower monthly running costs, while seeking a supplementary budget through the Finance Ministry to maintain core capacities.

10. On 11 March, the Independent Electoral Complaints Commission released a final report on alleged fraud during the 2014 presidential and provincial council elections. As a result, 9,887 temporary Independent Election Commission staff members (out of a total 107,479) at 3,189 polling stations (out of a total of 22,778) were barred from re-employment by the Commission. In addition, three permanent Election Commission staff members were dismissed, as were eight permanent Complaints Commission staff members.

11. On 4 March, President Ghani issued a decree restoring the oversight powers of provincial councils over local government departments. That action ended a strike by provincial councils that had commenced after the lower house of the National Assembly had voted to remove the oversight powers on 28 January.

12. President Ghani continued to engage with Afghan and regional interlocutors to promote national reconciliation. On 30 April, during his visit to India, President Ghani took the opportunity to express openness to the Taliban and other anti-Government groups playing a role within the political landscape of Afghanistan, as distinct from "foreign terrorist fighters" whom he stated had no place in Afghanistan's future. In a joint press conference on 12 May during the visit to Kabul of the Prime Minister of Pakistan, Nawaz Sharif, President Ghani underlined that the two countries faced common enemies, a statement echoed by Prime Minister Sharif. In his domestic outreach, President Ghani publicly assured Afghan society, including political parties, religious scholars, tribal elders and civil society activists, that a potential peace process would be conducted in an inclusive and transparent manner. In that regard, it was emphasized by government officials that any negotiations with the Taliban would preserve the achievements of the past 14 years, including women's rights, and would reaffirm Afghanistan's national interests, also in relation to its neighbours. On 2 and 3 May, a "track-two" meeting was convened in Qatar by a non-governmental organization. A diverse group of Afghans attended in their personal capacities.

13. In support of a rights-based approach to a durable peace process, the civil society-led Afghan People's Dialogue on Peace commenced its third phase of

activities, focusing on convening policymakers and civil society organizations to assist in the implementation of national and provincial road maps for peace. Facilitation is provided by the United Nations Mission in Afghanistan (UNAMA).

14. The joint secretariat of the Afghanistan Peace and Reintegration Programme reported that as at 30 April 2015 a total of 10,240 individuals, including 949 commanders, had joined the programme, and 7,813 weapons had been collected, since the inception of the programme in August 2010. In addition to drawing low-level fighters off the battlefield, the programme continued to support livelihood and reintegration opportunities to support former combatants and their communities.

B. Security

15. The security situation in Afghanistan deteriorated, as anti-Government elements continued to test the capability and resolve of the Afghan National Security Forces across the country. In the week after the 22 April announcement by the Taliban of the start of the spring offensive there was a 45 per cent increase in recorded armed clashes, compared with 2014.

16. As mentioned above, the United States and Afghanistan announced in their joint statement that the United States would maintain its current posture of 9,800 troops through the end of 2015. The non-combat Resolute Support Mission of the North Atlantic Treaty Organization (NATO) continued to train, advise and assist the Afghan National Security Forces. At a meeting held in Antalya, Turkey, on 13 May, NATO Ministers for Foreign Affairs endorsed a set of guidelines and principles for NATO post-2016 support to the Afghan National Security Forces. Following the closure of the Resolute Support Mission at the end of 2016, the NATO-Afghanistan enhanced enduring partnership will be civilian-led but will maintain a military component. The Taliban condemned both developments.

17. Between 15 February and 30 April, the United Nations recorded 5,033 security-related incidents across the country, representing a 6 per cent increase against the same period in 2014 and a 45 per cent increase against the same period in 2013. The southern, south-eastern and eastern regions continued to account for the majority of security incidents in the country, with 71 per cent of the total incidents recorded during the period. The northern and north-eastern regions showed an increase of 12 per cent in security incident levels compared with the same period in 2014.

18. In the 22 April announcement of the spring offensive, named "Azm", the Taliban declared that targets would be "foreign occupiers especially their permanent military bases, their intelligence and diplomatic centres", as well as government officials and Afghan security forces. Although attacks were recorded on several international military bases, they amounted during the period to less than 1 per cent of recorded incidents. As seen in past offensives and during the period as a whole, the Afghan security forces and government personnel and facilities were the main target of Taliban operations.

19. The security situation in the northern province of Kunduz deteriorated significantly with the launch on 25 April of a major assault by anti-Government elements, comprised of the Taliban, and, most likely, foreign fighters pushed into Afghanistan from their bases in North Waziristan following counter-insurgency

operations by the Pakistani military. This necessitated the deployment of reinforcements by Afghan security forces to contain the situation and ensure the security of the provincial capital, Kunduz City, as well as the district administrative centres. With the deployment of additional security forces, the situation reportedly stabilized. Anti-Government elements launched additional operations, aimed at undermining the credibility of the security forces, in other provinces including Badakhshan, Badghis, Faryab and Kunar.

20. Responding to heightened concerns over the security situation, the Government underlined to the public and members of the National Assembly the efforts of the Afghan security forces. Since assuming the responsibility for security, the Afghan security forces continued to plan and launch operations countrywide. After undertaking a large scale operation in Hilmand Province between mid-February and mid-April, Afghan security forces conducted similar scale operations in Faryab, Kunduz and Nangarhar. Additional operations took place in other areas that had long been under the control of insurgents, such as the Nawa District in Ghazni Province.

21. Attrition rates for both the security forces and anti-Government elements reportedly increased as the fighting intensified. The Ministry of Interior confirmed a significant increase in casualties sustained by the security forces in the first 15 weeks of the year, while both government and independent estimates indicated that insurgents suffered similarly high losses.

22. Established trends in the typology of reported security incidents remained unchanged, with armed clashes accounting for the majority (54 per cent) of security incidents, followed by improvised explosive devices accounting for 28 per cent of total incidents. Anti-Government elements also sought to exert influence through intimidation, including targeted killings. In total, from 15 February to 30 April, 160 assassinations and 40 failed assassination attempts were recorded, representing a 10 per cent increase against the same period in 2014. In addition, 91 abductions were recorded across the country during the reporting period, representing a 21.3 per cent increase, compared with the same period in 2014. Suicide attacks decreased from 25 to 23 compared with the same period in 2014. There were several high-profile incidents during the reporting period in Kabul City, including the assassination of the Chief of Police of Uruzgan on 18 March, two suicide car bomb attacks on international military forces on 26 February and 10 April and an attack on a private guesthouse on 13 May. The Taliban claimed responsibility for all four attacks. Responsibility for an unsuccessful suicide attack on a member of the National Assembly on 29 March has not been claimed by any insurgent group.

23. In May 2015, the Ministry of Interior estimated that there were some 7,180 foreign fighters across Afghanistan, the majority associated with Tehrik-e-Taliban Pakistan and the Islamic Movement of Uzbekistan. There was continued speculation on the presence of Islamic State in Iraq and the Levant (ISIL) and affiliated groups. On 31 March, the Islamic Movement of Uzbekistan reportedly pledged allegiance to ISIL, and there were further unconfirmed reports of several extremist insurgent groups also joining ISIL. However, despite the initial attribution of several attacks, most notably a suicide attack on a bank in Jalalabad on 18 April, there remained a lack of clarity on any operational presence by ISIL.

24. During the reporting period there were 27 security incidents involving United Nations personnel, including 12 incidents of intimidation, 3 detentions, 8 criminal-

related, 3 attacks with small arms fire on United Nations convoys in the provinces of Balkh, Herat and Nangarhar and 1 brief abduction of a United Nations national staff member in the south-eastern region.

C. Regional cooperation

25. Afghanistan's National Unity Government continued its active engagement with regional partners. On 19 and 20 April, President Ghani visited the Islamic Republic of Iran. After meetings with Supreme Leader Ayatollah Ali Khamenei and President Hassan Rouhani, the two countries pledged greater cooperation in the areas of security information sharing, counter-narcotics, the sharing of water resources, and refugees and migrants. From 27 to 29 April, President Ghani travelled to India, where he met with Prime Minister Narendra Modi and President Shri Pranab Mukherjee. India reiterated its readiness to join the Afghanistan-Pakistan Transit Trade Agreement. On 11 May, the lower house of the National Assembly ratified a strategic partnership agreement with Turkey, aimed at promoting further cooperation in the fields of governance, and social, economic and political affairs.

26. Discussions on Afghanistan, including on security and economic issues, continued in multilateral cooperation forums. Activities under the Heart of Asia-Istanbul Process included two regional technical group meetings on confidence-building measures, namely, counter-terrorism on 11 March in Ankara and counter-narcotics on 29 April in Baku. On 25 May, a meeting of Heart of Asia-Istanbul Process senior officials was held in Islamabad. The discussions centred on regional cooperation to address security challenges and the Afghan peace process, including the role of the region, as well as regional priorities for economic connectivity. On 21 May, the International Contact Group on Afghanistan met in Kabul to consider issues related to security, the Tokyo Mutual Accountability Framework, human rights, elections and regional dialogue.

27. At meetings of the Collective Security Treaty Organization on 2 April and the Commonwealth of Independent States on 3 April, ministers for foreign affairs discussed the situation in Afghanistan. Central Asian representatives expressed increasing concern at the spread of violent extremism from Afghanistan and agreed to strengthen their southern borders. Similar concerns were expressed during the 14 April meeting of the Shanghai Cooperation Organization in Moscow, at which Afghanistan was represented for the first time as an observer.

28. From 4 to 6 March, the Organization for Security and Cooperation in Europe, the United Nations Regional Centre for Preventive Diplomacy for Central Asia and the United Nations Counter-Terrorism Implementation Task Force held a workshop in Ashgabat on counter-terrorism and a border security workshop. Participants agreed that securing borders required a multidimensional approach incorporating development and technological aspects, backed by political will. United Nations entities and the Governments of Afghanistan and Tajikistan also organized a conference on counter-terrorism in Dushanbe on 14 and 15 May. Participants shared views on lessons learned from the development of an action plan for implementation of the United Nations counter-terrorism strategy in Central Asia, for possible use in the Heart of Asia-Istanbul Process.

29. On 9 and 10 April in Dushanbe, experts from the three countries finalized the draft Afghanistan-Pakistan-Tajikistan Trilateral Transit Trade Agreement. On 24 April, the Ministers of Water and Power of Afghanistan, Kyrgyzstan, Pakistan and Tajikistan signed the final pending documents for the Central Asia-South Asia Electricity Transmission and Trade Project. Construction is scheduled to begin in September 2015, with completion planned for 2018. Afghanistan is to receive 300 of the 1,300 MW of electricity delivered from Tajikistan and Kyrgyzstan, as well as revenue from transit fees.

30. A number of high-level contacts between Afghanistan and Pakistan took place towards improving their bilateral relationship and demonstrating the will of both countries to enhance their political and military cooperation. During his visit to Kabul on 12 May, Prime Minister Nawaz Sharif of Pakistan reiterated his country's support for the National Unity Government and for an Afghan-led and Afghan-owned peace process. Visits to Kabul were made by Pakistan's Chief of Army Staff, the Head of Pakistan's Inter-Services Intelligence, former President Asif Ali Zardari and former Prime Minister Yousaf Raza Gillani. On 18 May, the Afghan National Directorate of Security and the Pakistani Inter-Services Intelligence signed a memorandum of understanding on counter-terrorism cooperation. The memorandum sparked intense discussions within the Afghan National Assembly and political sphere, with the National Directorate of Security subsequently issuing a statement on 24 May in which it noted that the memorandum would be finalized only after wider consultations. On 26 May, the Deputy Foreign Minister of Afghanistan, Hekmat Karzai, and the Foreign Secretary of Pakistan, Aizaz Chaudhry, met in Islamabad to discuss a number of issues pertaining to peace and stability, counter-terrorism, border security, economic cooperation, Afghan refugees and regional cooperation.

III. Human rights

31. Between 15 February and 30 April, UNAMA documented 2,126 civilian casualties (669 killed and 1,457 injured), reflecting a sharp increase of 23 per cent over the same period in 2014. The trend of record high numbers of civilian casualties continued. UNAMA attributed 1,545 civilian casualties (534 killed and 1,011 injured) to anti-Government elements, accounting for 73 per cent of total civilian casualties. UNAMA recorded 302 civilian casualties (74 killed and 228 injured) attributed to pro-Government forces (11 per cent to Afghan National Security Forces, 2 per cent to pro-Government militia and 1 per cent to international military forces), an 88 per cent increase, accounting for 14 per cent of total civilian casualties. Eight per cent of all civilian casualties resulted from unattributed crossfire between pro-Government forces and anti-Government elements while 5 per cent were mainly from unattributed explosive remnants of war. Ground engagements continued to be the leading cause of civilian casualties, causing 617 civilian casualties (150 killed and 467 injured), followed by improvised explosive devices, accounting for 503 civilian casualties (162 killed and 341 injured).

32. Large-scale attacks by anti-Government elements deliberately targeting civilians continued during the reporting period. On 18 April, a suicide attacker detonated his explosive vest at the entrance of a bank in Jalalabad City, Nangarhar Province, targeting civilian government officials who were collecting their salaries and killing 30 civilians and injuring 123 others. The Taliban claimed responsibility for the 13 May attack on a Kabul guest house, at which a cultural event was being

hosted, resulting in 14 civilian deaths and injuries to several others. Civilian casualties attributed to pro-Government forces included an incident on 24 April in Alingar District, Laghman Province, in which a mortar round fired by the Afghan National Army impacted a civilian residence, killing seven civilians and injuring eight. The national army reported that they had fired the mortar following an attack against an army check post.

33. From 1 January to 10 May, the Taliban claimed responsibility for 11 separate attacks against legal professionals and courthouses, causing 114 civilian casualties, with 28 killed and 86 injured, an increase of more than 600 per cent over the same period the previous year. Figures recorded by UNAMA indicate higher casualty numbers than those claimed by the Taliban, as well as an additional six incidents of abductions, threats, intimidations and harassment of judicial authorities. This included the 9 April attack against the office of the Attorney General in Mazar-e-Sharif and the two suicide attacks on 4 and 10 May against civilian buses transporting employees of the Attorney General's Office in Kabul.

34. On 22 April, under the rubric of the announcement launching their spring offensive, the Taliban released a statement instructing the group's fighters to avoid civilian casualties. The statement listed a number of protected facilities, including schools, universities and health centres, as well as public welfare projects. Following the Taliban statement and a series of deliberate attacks on civilians claimed by the Taliban, UNAMA issued two public statements condemning the attacks against the Attorney General's Office on 10 May and against a guest house in Kabul and the Department of Haj and Religious Endowment in Hilmand on 13 May. Both statements reiterated that international humanitarian law, which binds all parties to the conflict in Afghanistan, including the Taliban, prohibits attacks against civilians and civilian locations. On 14 May, the Taliban stated they did not accept any foreigner as falling under the definition of "civilian", but did not address the issue of Afghan civilians killed in any of the recent attacks.

35. The United Nations-led country task force on monitoring and reporting on children and armed conflict documented 523 child casualties (135 killed and 388 injured) in 254 incidents between 15 February and 30 April. Child casualties increased 2 per cent compared with the previous reporting period. Most child casualties continued to be caused during ground engagements between pro-Government forces and anti-Government elements (270 casualties), followed by improvised explosive devices attacks (124 casualties) and explosive remnants of war (80 casualties). Children were especially vulnerable in the southern region of the country, which witnessed 27 per cent of the total child casualties reported, owing mainly to an increase in ground engagements. Anti-Government elements were responsible for 46 per cent of the total child casualties, while pro-Government forces were responsible for 18 per cent. The remaining 36 per cent of casualties were unattributed. On 14 March, the Government of Afghanistan submitted to the United Nations its fourth progress report on the implementation of the children and armed conflict action plan. In its report, the Government highlighted steps taken during the period from 1 January to 31 December 2014 to advance implementation of the action plan and the annexes on reporting on killing, maiming and sexual violence against children.

36. On 19 April, UNAMA and the Office of the United Nations High Commissioner for Human Rights launched a report entitled "Justice through the

eyes of Afghan women: cases of violence against women addressed through mediation and court adjudication", featuring documentation of the significant use of mediation, rather than court adjudication, to resolve cases and recommendations for reforms to improve women's access to justice.

37. The killing of a 27-year-old woman on 19 March by a crowd in Kabul City, over false allegations that she had burned a copy of the Koran, sparked public outrage and widespread condemnation across Afghanistan and internationally. The Government condemned the attack and launched an investigation. On 6 May, the primary court in Kabul convicted 12 civilians of the murder, sentencing 4 of them to death. All court decisions are currently subject to appeal. On 19 May, the verdict for the 19 police officers charged was announced, with 11 officers sentenced to one year in prison for dereliction of duty and the remaining eight acquitted owing to lack of evidence. Afghan and international human rights and legal defence groups expressed serious concerns about the legal process for all convictions stating that they failed to comply with Afghan and international fair trial standards.

38. Speaking at a 5 March event ahead of International Women's Day, President Ghani emphasized the commitment of the Government to bringing fundamental and sustainable change for Afghan women, including for participation in decision-making, economic empowerment, education and health. The United Nations supported outreach activities across the country around International Women's Day, on the global theme "Empower women; empower humanity". From 9 to 20 March, the United Nations supported the participation of a Government of Afghanistan delegation to the fifty-ninth session of the Commission on the Status of Women, which was held at United Nations Headquarters.

39. During the reporting period, the Government outlined a proposal for a national plan for elimination of torture as part of its response to a UNAMA report, released on 25 February, on the treatment of conflict-related detainees in Afghan custody. The proposed national plan, to be overseen by the Office of National Security Adviser and the Second Vice-President, includes regulatory reforms, prevention measures and training. The Second Vice-President informed UNAMA and Afghan civil society organizations on 29 April that a committee with their participation would be formed to draft an action plan and monitor its implementation.

IV. Implementation of the Kabul process and coordination of development assistance

40. During the period under review, President Ghani and Chief Executive Abdullah engaged directly on the development agenda, requesting presentations from major donors, international financial institutions and the United Nations on their current development portfolios. The review of the portfolios and the annual Ministry of Finance-led development cooperation dialogue process are expected to inform the future development strategies and policies of the Government. On 8 March, the United Nations submitted its portfolio review to the Office of the President. It is expected that the proposed United Nations Development Assistance Framework 2015-2019, endorsed in principle by the former administration on 6 May 2014 but pending approval by the new Government, will be informed by the current deliberations. Thus far, the Government has expressed its intention to consolidate the current 22 national priority programmes.

41. On 3 April, the Cabinet approved the proposed plan of the Ministry of Finance for reform implementation and monitoring. Drawing on the paper entitled "Realizing self-reliance", which was shared at the December 2014 London Conference, the plan consists of 52 measures, of which 26 are identified as priorities for action within six months. The Ministry of Finance engaged with line ministries to advance the plan.

42. The economic and fiscal situation in Afghanistan remained challenging. According to World Bank data, Afghanistan achieved a 2 per cent growth rate in 2014, with a rate of 2.5 per cent forecast for 2015. As a consequence of poor economic performance, fiscal vulnerabilities were likely to remain high in 2015. According to World Bank analysis, there was a need for dramatically improved revenue performance relative to 2014 in order to avoid a higher than budgeted fiscal gap in 2015. Furthermore, it was emphasized that economic recovery required the implementation of reforms to address revenue and corruption and governance concerns, particularly those affecting confidence in the economy.

43. On 20 March, the International Monetary Fund announced a nine-month staff-monitored programme, aimed at addressing fiscal and banking vulnerabilities, preserving international reserves and low debt, maintaining low inflation and strengthening competitiveness. In response to the programme, the Government significantly increased some customs duties and the enforcement of income tax laws. The Ministry of Finance indicated that initial revenue projections were 4 per cent above the targets agreed with the International Monetary Fund and that the Government was able to cover its planned expenditures, including salaries and operational costs.

44. The Government of Afghanistan continued to pursue the development of extractive industries as a significant economic opportunity. In response to an 8 February request by the Government, the United Nations provided support in the areas of policy development, regulatory capacities and public consultations. It also supported the Ministry of Commerce and Industries in conducting an archaeological screening in Hajigk, a priority area for exploration. At the board meeting of the Extractive Industries Transparency Initiative in Brazzaville, Republic of the Congo, on 14 and 15 April, Afghanistan was granted an 18-month candidacy extension to join the Initiative, in keeping with a commitment to the Government's reform agenda.

45. Regarding the Government's efforts to address illicit land usurpation, on 19 March, the United Nations released a report with recommendations on developing oversight and accountability in the land distribution framework, including a centralized land management system. In April, the Supreme Court and the Second Vice-President agreed that responsibility for land titles would be transferred to the Afghanistan Independent Land Authority. Established by presidential decree on 8 April, the High Council on Land and Water convened for the first time on 5 May, chaired by President Ghani. President Ghani expressed his commitment to addressing land usurpation as a factor having an impact on socioeconomic development. The Ministry of Commerce and Industries was assisted by UNAMA in developing proposed legal amendments aimed at strengthening the environment for business and trade.

46. On 26 April, the Independent Joint Anti-Corruption Monitoring and Evaluation Committee released its seventh biannual report, covering the period from July to December 2014, and a compendium of the status of implementation of its

323 recommendations, covering an array of anti-corruption issues of relevance to both the Government and the international community. In the report, the Committee noted that 53 recommendations had been completely implemented, 149 recommendations were under implementation or had been partially implemented, 33 recommendations had not yet been implemented and 88 recommendations had been recently issued, their implementation status not yet reviewed.

47. At a 12 March meeting of the International Police Coordination Board, the Minister of Interior launched a strategy for the professionalization of the police, including measures for increased accountability and improved relations between police and communities. During the reporting period, the United Nations continued to advocate for accountable policing, to build capacity and to support the professionalization of women officers. As at 28 April, 52 police women councils were established, 12 of which were within the Ministry of Interior directorates, 10 in Kabul police districts and 30 in the other provinces. The Ministry of Interior was assisted by the United Nations in the provision of literacy classes to the police, with 4,989 officers, including 202 women, currently enrolled in programmes across 19 provinces.

V. Humanitarian assistance

48. The humanitarian situation remained challenging owing to a combination of conflict and extreme weather conditions, with continued population displacement and increased vulnerability levels among affected communities. Relief operations reached some 8,827 families affected by natural disasters, and progress was made in key areas, such as immunization programmes. However, acute food insecurity and access to vulnerable populations, as well as the safety of humanitarian workers, remained major sources of concern. At meetings in Islamabad and Tehran, significant progress was made on the formulation of comprehensive return and reintegration strategies for Afghan refugees, whose levels of voluntary return continued to remain high compared with 2014.

49. At the 25th meeting of the Tripartite Commission for the Voluntary Repatriation of Afghan Refugees from Pakistan, held in Islamabad on 11 March, representatives of Afghanistan, Pakistan and the Office of the United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees agreed to support a comprehensive return and reintegration strategy for Afghan refugees. The strategy would include a process of voluntary repatriation and reintegration, taking into account Afghanistan's absorption capacity, while Pakistan would agree to register all undocumented Afghan migrants. As a result, Afghanistan established a high national commission on migration, chaired by the President, to deal with overall displacement issues, including refugee returns and reintegration.

50. On 19 May, the fourth meeting of the Quadripartite Steering Committee on the Solutions Strategy for Afghan Refugees to Support Voluntary Repatriation, Sustainable Reintegration and Assistance to Host Countries comprised of Afghanistan, Iran (Islamic Republic of), Pakistan and the United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees (UNHCR) was held in Tehran. The role that Iran (Islamic Republic of) and Pakistan have played in hosting large Afghan refugee communities was acknowledged and the need for joint planning to include approaches to the issue of economic migrants was emphasized.

51. The levels of voluntary return of Afghan refugees and undocumented Afghans continued to remain high compared with the same period in 2014. The overall rate of undocumented Afghans returning from Pakistan through the Torkham and Spin Boldak border crossing points stands at 172 per cent of total returns and deportations in the same period in 2014. From 1 January to 30 April, 149,555 undocumented Afghans returned from Iran (Islamic Republic of) (84,502) and Pakistan (65,053), compared with 76,238 during the same period in 2014. A total of 75,027 undocumented Afghans were deported from Iran (Islamic Republic of) (68,094) and Pakistan (6,933), compared with 68,619 during the same period in 2014. During the first four months of 2015, 21,505 refugees returned under the United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees voluntary repatriation programme, compared with 3,817 during the same period in 2014, of which 95 per cent were from Pakistan. It was estimated that 30 to 40 per cent of returnees from Pakistan were in need of assistance. However, owing to funding shortfalls, only 10 per cent can be assisted. Beyond short-term needs, assistance with durable livelihoods and reintegration support is required.

52. Afghanistan continued to host a significant number of refugees in Khost and Paktika Provinces who had fled North Waziristan, Pakistan, owing to military operations. Following a United Nations reverification exercise in both provinces, a 15 per cent decrease in the number of registered refugees since 31 January was recorded. As at 21 April, there were 35,252 families, totalling 243,248 individuals registered as refugees (175,929 in Khost, 67,319 in Paktika). Humanitarian agencies have continued to provide them with assistance.

53. As at 30 April, the Task Force on Internally Displaced Persons, co-chaired by the Ministry of Refugees and Repatriation and UNHCR, recorded 35,800 persons displaced as a result of conflict in 2015. The highest number of displaced persons were recorded in Faryab and Hilmand Provinces, with 519 families (3,206 individuals) and 374 families (2,938), respectively. During the reporting period, Kunduz Province emerged as the primary area of concern, with conflict between Government forces and anti-Government elements leading to large-scale displacement. Humanitarian actors continue to conduct joint assessments of families who have petitioned the Departments of Refugees and Repatriation for assistance, with 8,558 families assessed to date, of which 3,640 families have been verified as conflict-displaced persons in need of assistance. From March to May, the United Nations used its extensive logistical network to assist approximately 238,000 conflict-displaced persons with an estimated 7,800 metric tons of food.

54. Mine action partners, coordinated by the United Nations, cleared 46 minefields and three battlefields in 14 Afghan communities in the first quarter of 2015. Funding may not be sufficient, however, to meet the 2015 targets of the workplan under the Anti-Personnel Mine Ban Convention. It is estimated that 4,025 minefields and 245 battlefields remain, affecting 1,603 communities across 255 districts, threatening the lives and livelihoods of Afghan civilians. Working with NATO Resolute Support Mission, the United Nations continued to address explosive hazard contamination, including firing ranges, from operations of the former International Security Assistance Force.

55. During the reporting period, 24 out of 34 provinces were affected by extreme weather, including avalanches, heavy snowfall and flooding. A total of 290 people were reported killed, 97 injured and 9,009 houses damaged or destroyed. The

national disaster management committee and humanitarian agencies continued efforts to respond to the food and non-food needs of all affected populations with available stocks.

56. Preliminary assessments conducted by the food security and agriculture cluster during the reporting period indicated that the purchasing power of vulnerable households had deteriorated by approximately 10 per cent in most parts of the country in the past five years. This is expected to be compounded by high levels of acute food insecurity among displaced households owing to conflict or natural disasters, as well as returning refugees and existing poor households. According to indications, continued severe food insecurity will affect approximately 1.4 million people across the country.

57. Polio eradication efforts continued to face access challenges in southern and eastern Afghanistan, as well as in the south-eastern and western regions. Since the lifting of a temporary access ban by armed non-state actors in Hilmand Province in early February, the Global Polio Eradication Initiative conducted supplementary polio immunization activities. Despite those efforts, the first case of polio in Afghanistan for 2015 was identified in January in Reg District, Hilmand Province. Between January and May, one National Immunization Day and seven vaccination campaigns were held, including in newly accessible areas in Panjwaj District, Kandahar Province; Barg-i Matal District, Nuristan Province; and Lal Pur District, Nangarhar Province. During the reporting period, polio campaigners focused on low-performing districts in southern, eastern, western and south-eastern Afghanistan, leading to successful campaigns in Nangarhar, Kunar, Laghaman, Kandahar, Hilmand, Paktika, and Farah Provinces.

58. Despite the increase in security incidents during the first quarter of 2015, the volume of incidents against humanitarian-related personnel, assets and facilities and violations against health facilities remained consistent with the same period in 2014. The United Nations global monitoring framework recorded a total of 74 incidents between 1 January and 30 April, of which 52 affected non-governmental organizations. The incidents included the killing of 11 aid workers, with another 10 injured. In addition, 54 aid workers were abducted and 2 arrested. There were 11 incidents recorded against health facilities or workers and 2 against demining sites.

59. As at 30 April, humanitarian funding for Afghanistan reached $172 million, of which $129.5 million is designated for activities foreseen within the Humanitarian Strategic Response Plan and $24.6 million for the International Red Cross and Red Crescent Movement. As at 1 June the Humanitarian Strategic Response Plan was 27 per cent funded. Ninety-three per cent of the designated funds of the Plan are allocated to agencies, funds and programmes of the United Nations system and 7 per cent to non-governmental organizations. The common humanitarian pooled fund has received $18.3 million. As a result of funding constraints, shortfalls in available food supplies are anticipated in June and will have a serious impact on the humanitarian response to address acute malnutrition. In order for operations to continue throughout 2015, the World Food Programme is conducting an urgent appeal for $65.6 million. That funding would serve to support the humanitarian needs of thousands of people recently displaced by conflict in a number of provinces, notably Kunduz, as well as other emerging humanitarian needs.

VI. Counter-narcotics

60. On 21 April, the socioeconomic analysis portion of the Afghanistan Opium Survey 2014 was released by the United Nations Office on Drugs and Crime. The report analysed the opiate economy and the factors and determinants driving opium poppy cultivation. Despite estimated potential gross value of opiates in Afghanistan decreasing by almost 9 per cent to $2.84 billion since the previous year, opiates still account for the equivalent of 13 per cent of the country's gross domestic product. A highly attractive crop to farmers, opium cultivation in many rural communities remains high, accounting for 36 per cent of the income of farmers who cultivate it. The price decrease in the average farm-gate price of dry opium in 2014 was also reflected in a decrease in heroin prices both within Afghanistan and across borders, although existing information does not show a major change in demand in the main opiate-consuming countries.

61. During the period under review, drug crop eradication led by provincial governors was reported in nine provinces in Afghanistan, with a total of 3,042 ha of opium poppy being eradicated as at 10 May. Initial assessments indicate security incidents during the eradication efforts are lower, compared with previous years, owing to the efforts of the Ministry of Counter-Narcotics to improve coordination with the other ministries with a security remit. Five members of the security forces have been killed and 16 personnel wounded since the start of the eradication operations in 2015.

62. Afghan law enforcement authorities also conducted a total of 841 counter-narcotics operations during the reporting period, resulting in the seizure of approximately 14,576 kg of narcotics. This included 898 kg of heroin, 8,607 kg of opium, and 5,071 kg of cannabis. In addition, 504 kg of solid precursor chemicals and 1,540 L of liquid precursor chemicals were seized. Two heroin manufacturing laboratories were dismantled, 818 suspects were arrested, and 187 vehicles and 152 weapons were seized. During those operations, two members of the security forces were killed and three were wounded. The efforts of the border liaison offices that support operations with Afghan, Iranian, Pakistani, Tajik and Uzbek border police operations collectively resulted in the seizure of 3,027 kg of narcotics within the overall seizure total.

VII. Mission support

63. UNAMA has continued to ensure effective use of its resources to accomplish cost-efficient operations in support of mandated activities throughout the country. UNAMA preparations for the roll-out of the next phase of Umoja are on track.

VIII. Observations

64. The formation of the National Unity Government is nearly complete. After a long and challenging process, the appointment of all ministers and the formalization of the Office of the Chief Executive and the Secretariat of the Council of Ministers are important achievements. The development and implementation of 100-day action plans for each ministry, now under way, should help to realize shared national

objectives. With the Cabinet all but in place, it is imperative that the Government accelerate its reform agenda.

65. The creation of the Special Commission on Electoral Reform demonstrates the commitment of the National Unity Government to electoral reforms, as provided for in the 21 September 2014 agreement. Comprehensive electoral reforms will be crucial for restoring the faith of the Afghan people in the democratic process. That is a matter of urgency since, as according to the Afghan Constitution, parliamentary elections, as well as those for district councils, should already have taken place. I encourage the Government and relevant bodies to launch the electoral reform process and determine the electoral calendar. It will also be important to provide certainty on the role of the lower house of the National Assembly after the conclusion of its term on 22 June. The United Nations looks forward to engaging with the Commission and stands ready to provide advice.

66. The priority actions identified by the Government under the "Realizing Self-reliance" agenda, including to advance reforms, strengthen public accountability and promote economic growth are encouraging. In that regard, 100-day action plans have the potential to build the necessary public confidence and buy-in. Continuing to provide international assistance to Afghanistan will be necessary in the short and longer terms. The agreement on the International Monetary Fund programme represents an important step towards securing longer-term access by the Government to financial support.

67. The intensification of the conflict across the country hampered progress across a range of issues and exacted a terrible toll on the civilian population. I am deeply concerned by the dramatic increase in civilian casualties, despite public commitments by the parties to protect civilians. Attacks deliberately targeting civilians are strictly prohibited under international humanitarian law. During the reporting period anti-Government elements repeatedly attacked civilians working in the justice system, a deplorable targeting of civilian personnel. The conflict continues to displace significant numbers of civilians, in addition to those in Afghanistan displaced by military operations in Pakistan.

68. I am encouraged by the constructive dialogue between the Governments of Afghanistan and host countries on the formulation of comprehensive return and reintegration strategies for Afghan refugees. With the growing issue of internal displacement in Afghanistan, however, there will be a need to ensure national capacities to manage the volume of returns. The support of Member States to address the immediate and long-term needs of returnees will be necessary.

69. It is my grave concern that the humanitarian situation will deteriorate further if fighting intensifies. In order for relief efforts to succeed, the safety of humanitarian workers and access to vulnerable individuals remain of critical importance. All parties to the conflict must respect their obligations under international human rights and humanitarian laws. The generous contributions by Member States have supported efforts to prevent and alleviate the suffering of thousands of ordinary Afghans. Nevertheless, I note with concern that humanitarian funding is currently lower than it was at the time in 2014, while the needs are significantly higher and continue to increase.

70. I continue to be concerned about violence against women and the management of such cases by the criminal justice system. The public murder of a woman by a

mob of men on 19 March in broad daylight in the capital underscored the continuing threat of violence against women. However, the outrage expressed peacefully in the wake of the killing by countless ordinary Afghans was unparalleled and spurred discussions in Afghan society on the necessity of addressing those issues. It is essential to the credibility of the justice system that allegations of abuse and mistreatment are thoroughly investigated and appropriately prosecuted so that those responsible can be held accountable. Securing a robust and transparent criminal justice system, with due regard to protecting the rights of women, remains vital.

71. Afghanistan continues to deepen its interaction with its neighbours in respect of building regional confidence and connectivity. The increased engagement during the reporting period between the Governments of Afghanistan and Pakistan, including public declarations stating their commitment to work together for peace and prosperity, is encouraging. Visits by President Ghani to India and Iran (Islamic Republic of) pointed to the importance accorded by his Government to those key partners as well. During my upcoming visit to Central Asia, I will underline the importance of strengthening trade and exchange with Afghanistan in order to boost shared economic growth and regional stability.

72. Afghans desperately want respite from the ever-present violence that has such a damaging impact on their lives. At local events and meetings, they continue to express their desire for peace and its realization through dialogue. The Government of Afghanistan has stated its commitment to engage in talks with the Taliban, who have indicated their interest in a political process. An essential element that is missing, however, is the willingness of the armed opposition to meet the Government in direct talks. Without that engagement, no meaningful progress towards a peace negotiation will be possible. The United Nations will continue to provide support in that regard, in close consultation with the Government of Afghanistan.

73. In reference to the request by the Security Council that I conduct an examination of the role, structure and activities of all United Nations entities in Afghanistan, it was recently agreed to establish a Tripartite Commission, comprised of representatives of the Government, the international donor community, and UNAMA and affiliated agencies, funds and programmes. While that discussion is at its early stages, I am confident that it has the potential to be fruitful.

74. Finally, I thank all the United Nations personnel in Afghanistan and my Special Representative, Nicholas Haysom, for their commitment under challenging conditions, to support a more peaceful, prosperous and stable Afghanistan.